Artists and their Worlds

Courtney Pedersen

Visual arts education has changed dramatically in the past twenty years. The rise of art-as-research has occurred in tandem with a shift in emphasis from skills and technique training to critical and contextual knowledge. This change has caused some anxiety. American art historian, James Elkins, for example, has expressed his grave reservations about the rise of visual arts practice-led research. His concerns, originally outlined in "Ten Reasons to Mistrust the New PhD in Studio Art" (Elkins 2007), included the idea that within the research paradigm, artists are required to be more self-reflective than they are necessarily in the professional studio setting. One possible consequence of this self-reflexivity is a complete retreat to the academy, where the artist, in pursuit of a full comprehension of his or her own practice, becomes separated from the (presumably) more 'real' world beyond.

These sorts of criticisms are not limited to the arts. The term 'ivory tower' is used to describe universities and academies of all kinds, where there is a presumption of separation from the world, but this pejorative ignores the connections that endure between the these towers and other communities and networks. Even ivory towers are staffed by real people. It is also easy to forget that the ivory tower enables critical distance, and that this means more than just an ignorance of everyday realities. The critical distance of the ivory tower allows its inhabitants to reflect on life's patterns in non-habitual ways.

There are interesting parallels between the ivory tower of the institution and the fantasy environments of creative imagination. Artists and storytellers have used the fantastical as a similar strategy of remove. When we hear a wonder-tale, we are immersed in a world that bears no resemblance to our own, but is also a direct metaphor for our condition. The fantastic allows us the distance to consider our lives as part of a pattern that endures beyond time and place, to tap into a communal wisdom about that pattern, and to imagine when and how that pattern needs to be either affirmed or subverted. As Marina Warner has noted, "the wonders that create

the atmosphere of the fairy tale disrupt the apprehensible world in order to open spaces for dreaming alternatives" (Warner 1995, xvi).

Over the past two decades socially engaged art (or social practice) has become a distinct area of interest for some artists, but increasingly, even those artists whose work is not recognizably in this camp see the importance of reinforcing links with their communities. In my experience, regional artists have a particularly acute sense of their responsibility in this regard. Regional communities deal with a broad range of challenges and artists in these communities are all too aware of their vulnerability. Pablo Helguera describes socially engaged art as expanding "the social relationship, at times promoting ideas such as empowerment, criticality, and sustainability […]" (Helguera 2011, 13-14). These are precisely the characteristics that will strengthen regional communities and provide the core of their resilience.

While artists are not social workers, ethnographers or archeologists, they are able to assist their communities in ways that can complement those functions. By imagining the seemingly impossible, they affirm the possibility of change and regeneration, and their tall tales can tell us new truths.

References:

Elkins, James. 2007. "Ten Reasons to Mistrust the New PhD in Studio Art," *Art in America*, May: 108-109.

Helguera, Pablo. 2011. *Education for Socially Engaged Art: a materials and techniques handbook*. New York: Jorge Pinto Books.

Warner, Marina. 1995. *From the Beast to the Blonde.* London: Vintage.